

Discerning God's Plans

Acts 2:1-21, John 15:26-27; 16:4-15

June 12, 2011

I.

We all make decisions in life, don't we? Sometimes they're small decisions, and sometimes they are very significant. Sometimes they affect others, and sometimes they don't.

So how do we make these decisions? Do we believe we can change things, or is everything predestined? If we do have any control, how do we exercise it? And right now you probably are thinking that it's not surprising to hear a preacher begin a sermon by talking about choices.

But what choices do we have, really? After all, most of us have heard for a long time that God has a plan for our lives. If that is true, wouldn't it seem that God's plan automatically takes precedence over our meager efforts to make plans for ourselves?

This brings up two important points. First, we should correctly state the theological proposition about what God has planned. Contrary to some popular belief, God does not have a plan for our lives. God has many plans for us. It is plural, not singular.

The prophet Jeremiah said, "I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart" (29:11-13). And Paul tells us in Romans that God's will for us is good, and pleasing, and perfect (12:2).

This lead to the second point. The Bible confirms we have free will. God spoke through Moses and told the Hebrews if they obeyed God's laws they would be blessed, but if not they would be cursed (Deut. 30:15). Thus, they had choices. Upon entering the promised land Joshua told them to choose whether to serve the God of the Hebrews or foreign gods (24:15) Again, choices.

And Jesus later spoke of the need to keep his commandments (Jn. 14:15, 23). This implied the option to do otherwise. In many other places the Bible clearly states we can choose what we do, and those choices have consequences (Mt. 16:27, Rom. 2:6, 2 Cor. 5:10, Gal. 6:8).

So, are these ideas in conflict? God has plans for us. But we also have free will. How does that all work? I suggest that God's plans for us are entirely consistent with exercising our own free will.

For example, if we choose to do X, we might get God's Plan A. But if we decide on Y, then we get Plan B, which could be better. Or maybe Plan A is the default plan, but if we do something more, like pray, we get Plan B. And perhaps there is Plan C, Plan D, and so on. Perhaps for some plans God is neutral or has not stepped into events in this broken world. God is capable of all that.

But the point is that all of the plans are God's plans, and so the idea that our lives are guided by God's plan is correct. We always get one of God's plans, but which plan it is frequently could depend upon the decisions and choices we make.

So, back to my opening question. How do we make decisions? Perhaps we might want to know more about which plans God really wants for us. There is only one way to have guidance about that in this world. We rely upon the Holy Spirit to lead us in the paths God wants us to take.

II.

Let me repeat that. We rely on the Holy Spirit. And that is an especially appropriate subject today because today is the Day of Pentecost. We could say that today is the birthday of the

church. We celebrate a real event in history, when the Holy Spirit came into the world, and united Jesus' followers into a community that would become the worldwide Christian church.

We also celebrate the Holy Spirit working in our lives individually, as well as in the church. Just as the disciples were led by the Spirit, we also draw closer to God when the Spirit guides us.

But, before we talk about how the Spirit leads us in God's will, we have to acknowledge that the coming of the Spirit described in our first reading was a spectacular event, wasn't it?

Jesus had ascended to heaven. The disciples had elected Matthias to replace Judas. And a group of Jesus' followers were meeting in Jerusalem when, all of a sudden, Whoosh! A wind from heaven filled the house, and something like tongues of flame appeared and rested upon them.

Imagine what they must have thought as it was happening. The power of God was uniquely evident in a visible way. The disciples, from Galilee, were speaking in their language, and yet people from other countries, of which there were many, understood them in their languages.

And note that no one was speaking in tongues, described later in the Bible. Rather it was a special gift of universal understanding of languages that foretold the universality of the church as it would reach into the world. It was a miracle for the moment. The Bible does not suggest that the disciples communicated in this way during their later ministries.

And if we read a little further in the Book of Acts, we would learn that three thousand people became believers that day (2:41). This was the beginning of an explosive period of growth.

III.

But maybe someone hearing about this might say, "That's really great. I'm glad it worked out that way for them. But that was then, this is now. The church now has been established; so why is this important to me today"?

And the answer is that the Holy Spirit came for us, and came for now. Although there are many references to the spirit in the Old Testament they all begin with a small "s." The Spirit, with a capital "S," did not become manifest in the world until the events described in today's reading.

That's because we know from the Bible, and earlier sermons, and our Christian education courses, that the Holy Spirit came to carry on Jesus' work in the world; to take up where Jesus left off. But that is not always intuitively understandable is it? Sometimes a discussion about the Spirit can raise more questions than it answers. Sometimes we have to rely on faith.

And that reminds me of the story of the young mother who had gone to the store for some supplies for her infant. And on the way home, within sight of a gas station, she ran out of gas. But she had no gas can. She did, however, have a potty chair she had just purchased, and so she walked to the gas station just ahead, filled the pot with gas, and came back.

About this time the preacher at her church drove slowly by as he watched her empty the contents of the potty chair into her gas tank. He stopped, opened his car window, and said, "Ma'am, although I certainly share your religion, I do not share your faith."

The point here is that our faith in the Holy Spirit can come more easily than faith that a car could run on the usual contents of a potty chair.

We have the Holy Spirit within us now. The Spirit entered us when we were baptized, and was sealed within us forever. But that, in and of itself, is not sufficient. The Spirit must awaken within us, animate us, and show forth through our lives in order for us to know the Spirit's power.

Some examples might illustrate this point. After we drink a glass of water the water is inside us, but we probably don't feel it. However, if we're in the water in a pool or the ocean then it surrounds us, and we can feel the sensation of being completely wet.

Or it might be like buying a software program. We can install it on the computer and it is there. But it doesn't do us any good until we enter the product code and activate it.

But the best analogy is that of flames in today's reading. The Spirit enters us like an ember at baptism. But that ember does not mean that we have faith or are saved.

Something more must happen; something divine and exceptional. To use all of these examples, just as we jump in the water, we become soaked in the Spirit. Just as we activate our software, the Spirit is started up within us. And just as an ember bursts into flames, the Spirit is ignited in our lives. The Spirit, a dormant ember since baptism, now shows forth in light through us.

That was the result of Pentecost. Jesus' followers came alive with the divine power he had on earth, the church was born, and real people found themselves in real relationships with God.

IV.

So, how can we experience the Holy Spirit within us. For starters, it is necessary to want the Spirit to be part of our lives. After unilaterally coming into the world to carry on Jesus' work, we now generally understand that we have to ask the Spirit to be active within us individually.

We then can pray the Spirit will lead us to know God's will as we make decisions that affect whether we get God's Plan A or God's Plan B, so to speak. The Book of Proverbs says to seek and trust the Lord, and not rely on just our own understandings (3:5). The Spirit helps us do that.

And ultimately we must be open to sensing the Spirit inwardly speaking to us. Living in the Spirit means actually experiencing the Spirit. It need not be an emotional encounter, although it can be. We don't have to speak in tongues, although we might sense that gift. And we need not expect a supernatural feeling, although that can happen.

Perhaps it will be a light bulb moment, or perhaps more subtle. But we must do something, and it isn't difficult. Pray, as I said, that the Spirit comes to you. Read the Bible and ask the Spirit for meaning. Seek God's will and purposes. Meet with others and share God's fellowship with them. Have faith in God's assurances. And sometimes, just wait. God's word will make itself known.

We offer Christian Education on Sunday, and have had courses on the Spirit. We also are starting a very well-known course on Christianity this Wednesday called Alpha that will cover questions about our faith, including how the Holy Spirit works in our lives, individually.

And soon we will be starting a Roundtable discussion in the church about the future of St. Thomas. Among other things we will consider how the Holy Spirit works in our lives, collectively, as a community of faith. I will say more on that next week.

V.

But for now, we live as Christ taught, and one of those teachings is that the Holy Spirit is in the world to lead us. First Corinthians proclaims that "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him." And then it says these things are revealed to us through the Spirit, which is the only way to know God (2:9-11).

So as we celebrate this day of Pentecost, let us know that the Spirit is our partner in a world that regularly seems to place hurdles in our paths, and the Spirit shows us God as the giver of peace, the source of love, and our strength and support, always. *Amen.*